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Echoes of Division: Social Media, Disinformation, and Emotional Politics in Turkey's 2023 Elections

Bölünmenin Yankıları: Türkiye'de 2023 Seçimlerinde Sosyal Medya, Dezenformasyon ve Duygu Siyaseti

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between disinformation, social media algorithms, and emotional discourse during the 2023 presidential elections in Turkey. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it explores how emotionally charged content in social media posts by two key political figures during this process, namely Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, contributed to political polarization. The findings show that posts with higher emotional engagement received significantly more interactions, reinforcing divisive narratives and echo chambers. This interaction pattern suggests that the nature of the content is crucial in how it is disseminated and discussed online. The findings highlight the role of social media algorithms in amplifying content that elicits emotional responses, thereby deepening political divides and affecting public opinion. The study provides insights into how algorithm-driven amplification influences the broader political landscape.

Keywords: Disinformation, Social Media Algorithms, Emotional Politics, Political Polarization

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, 2023 Türkiye Cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimlerinde dezenformasyon, sosyal medya algoritmaları ve duygusal söylem arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektedir. Eleştirel Söylem Analizi (ESA) kullanılarak, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan ve Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu gibi bu süreçteki başlıca iki siyasi figürün sosyal medya paylaşımlarındaki duygusal içeriklerin, siyasi kutuplaşmaya nasıl katkı sağladığı araştırılmaktadır. Bulgular, duygusal açıdan güçlü etkileşimlere sahip paylaşımların, çok daha fazla etkileşim aldığını ve ayrıştırıcı anlatıları ve yankı odalarını güçlendirdiğini göstermektedir. Ayrıca bulgular, sosyal medya algoritmalarının duygusal tepkiler uyandıran içerikleri artırarak siyasi bölünmeleri derinleştirme rolünü vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dezenformasyon, Sosyal Medya Algoritmaları, Duygu Siyaseti, Politik Kutuplaşma

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1. Introduction

Democratic systems refer to political structures in which individuals can elect decision-makers representing them at domestic and international levels. Election processes are significant in the operation of democratic systems, serving as the decisive moment when voters use their ultimate power to select their leaders. This electoral process marks the culmination of citizens' participation, determining the individuals who will guide and represent them in government (Katz, 1997: 37-39). Accordingly, campaign periods are crucial for the election process because of their specific venue for politicians to interact with voters, make promises, and convince them to vote for themselves (Wojtasik, 2013: 27-34). In this context, the media serves as a platform that facilitates the connection between voters and candidates. It plays a crucial role in informing voters about candidates' promises and conveying public reactions to candidates. With the development of information technologies, how we get informed about and involved in politics has also transitioned into the digital realm. Social media networks started to customize their algorithms for each person to connect them and give them a digital journal through which they could share their words with others. Later, political engagement in social networks started to increase, and social media platforms have become a central element in political communication, offering an accessible and immediate way to reach out to followers, disseminate messages, and influence public opinion (Smith, 2013: 37-42).

The liberation of information among people today has brought about significant changes and contributed to improving democratic regimes. This is why we categorize the source of information, the media, as the fourth estate (Martin, 1998: 26-27). Until around ten years ago, TV broadcasting followed almost the same pace as the news via live streaming. It functioned within the same time and space limitations as the government or the state but operated faster. There was plenty of time for the editorial processes to act as gatekeepers. Local newspapers were known to use the local language occasionally, but the overall output was very similar. Today, we refer to newspapers, radio, and television as the "traditional mass media" subject to external mediation. However, with the digital transformation, the information flow has become personalized for each user, and the time perception has also changed. In a social media news feed, time perception is influenced by the sequence in which the content is displayed and how users interact with it. Newer posts typically appear at the top of the feed, and this can create a sense of chronological order. However, the algorithm may prioritize certain content based on relevancy, engagement, and other factors, which can change users' perception of the time flow (Sülflow et al., 2019: 168-190). For example, if a user spends more time engaging with a

particular post or the algorithm surfaces older content, it can make past events feel more current or vice versa. This can lead to distortions in the perception of time and manipulate people about current affairs. Time and speed of the spread of information are important factors regarding the ongoing digital transformation. However, the most significant change we experience may not concern the speed at which information is spread in the social media.

This article asks the question: Why does disseminating election campaigns through social media networks increase social polarization despite their mission of bringing communities together? In the context of Turkey's 2023 presidential elections, this paper analyzes the social media posts of the incumbent president, Tayyip Erdoğan, and the opposition candidate, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. The study examines how emotionally charged content from both candidates contributed to political polarization and how social media algorithms amplified this content, increasing interactions and reinforcing divisive narratives and echo chambers. The analysis focuses on how social media algorithms favor posts that generate strong emotional responses, such as fear, anger, or hope. This algorithmic bias creates a feedback loop, where emotionally charged content gains more visibility, leading to further engagement and deepening political divides.

This study employs a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to explore how social media posts contributed to political polarization during Turkey's 2023 presidential election, focusing on the candidates Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. To investigate how emotionally charged content played a role in amplifying political divides, posts were collected from both candidates' official Twitter (X) accounts over the election campaign period, which spanned from May 6, 2023, to May 14, 2023. This timeframe includes key moments in the campaign, such as debates, rallies, and major announcements. The selection of posts was guided by specific criteria, focusing on messages that contained emotionally charged rhetoric, such as appeals to fear, anger, or hope. In addition to emotional content, posts that were directly related to the candidates' political messaging during the elections were prioritized. Posts were also selected based on their level of engagement, capturing a range of interactions from viral posts with likes and shares to those with moderate engagement. This variety aimed to represent different levels of audience resonance.

The analysis involved manually coding the posts according to three main categories: emotionally charged content, divisive or unifying rhetoric, and engagement metrics. Emotionally charged content was defined as any post that contained explicit emotional appeals, whether invoking fear of threats, hope for future change, or anger towards the opposing side. Divisive rhetoric was coded as posts that framed political discourse in an "us versus them"

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narrative, while unifying rhetoric was coded as statements aiming to bridge divides and creating solidarity among voters. Finally, engagement metrics such as the number of likes, reposts, and comments were tracked to measure how strongly these posts resonated with the candidates' followers.

2. Social Media and Political Polarization

Ten years ago, people were watching TV or reading newspapers, and who was broadcasting or publishing was an important matter for the reliability of information. On the contrary, the reliability of information on social media today depends on various features, and it is hard to search for reliable sources. It is important to note that the Fourth Estate consists of media institutions because media is crucial in ensuring checks and balances within democratic systems. Even though governments tend to exert influence over traditional mass media, it still has a level of reliability that helps traditional media reach large audiences. Moreover, since the media provides information to the government, it can also directly influence decision-makers and supporters (Cobb et al., 1976: 136-138).

The relationship between power and knowledge is closely related to how and against whom the information will be used. Foucault emphasized the "discourse" of each knowledge instead of epistemes. According to him, knowledge was always purposeful, characterized by the desire to dominate and capture. It was not a neutral, abstract entity. Information was sought to be used: solid and unstable. This led Foucault to develop the concept of "knowledge/power," illustrating the inseparable connection between the two (Strathern, 2000). According to him, the most critical aspect of power is found in social relations. Power can be found in individuals through domination and oppression, but more importantly, power is also present in the production and use of knowledge. Power shifts and power disputes create space in which discourses can emerge. This information - and, in fact, all theories - are definitive. The definition of truth and lie within the scope of this information is the same (Strathern, 2000).

The milestone in integrating social media with political engagement can be traced back to U.S. President Barack Obama's election campaign in 2008. President Obama's victory was notably associated with the groundbreaking success of his social media campaigning, and this moment marked a paradigm shift, showcasing the potential of social network platforms as influential tools for political communication and mobilization (Hughes et al., 2010: 5-6). After three years, the Arab Spring, led by the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria from 2010 onwards, went down in history as another critical process in which the role of social media in mobilizing

the masses was emphasized. Following this, the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey are an important example, showcasing how individuals engaged in individual broadcasting and got swiftly organized. This event highlighted the transformative potential of social media, underlining its capacity to stimulate people for collective action in a remarkably short time (Poell and Van Dijck, 2018: 552).

In addition to facilitating social movements and protests, such as the Arab Spring or the 2013 Gezi protests, social media's impact took a different direction in election campaigns. Contrary to its previous constructive use, it gradually became a tool the government utilized. The aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's U.S. presidential election campaign sustained extended discussions, shedding light on social media networks' influential role in various contexts (Gorodnichenko et al., 2018). The Brexit process, in particular, underscored the potential for a mere rumor to be perceived as reality, following polarizing public opinion (Höller, 2021: 84-86). The Cambridge Analytica[2] case further intensified concerns by implicating personal privacy, sparking global discussions about the widespread influence of social media in shaping our perceptions, modes of communication, information consumption, and, fundamentally, the broader landscape of our democracies.

Politicians' social media accounts are not only necessary for election campaigning. It is also essential for politicians to maintain their political presence, especially in the international arena. This necessity has brought about many discussions on how social media and globalism interact (Flew and Iosifidis, 2020: 22). Social media networks' ability to provide people with a timeless discussion space, to connect people worldwide, and strengthen opposition politics are among popular study subjects aimed at proving their positive impact (Reitz, 2012: 45-46). However, the capacity of social media networks to control societal perception for political purposes, its association with the rise of populism, and its economic capacity also reveal the dark side of the coin.

According to a study conducted to understand the role of social media in communicating about space science, the most critical features of engaging messages on social media networks are photos for Facebook, as well as elements of anger, visual description, positivity, and anxiety. For X (formerly Twitter), visual elements (images, GIFs, videos), hashtags, and precision are

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[2] The Cambridge Analytica scandal raised many concerns about the unauthorized collection of personal data, inadequate data security measures, and using personal information for political purposes. The scandal specifically involved data analytics company Cambridge Analytica, which illegally collected the personal data of Facebook users and used that data to influence their political preferences.

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used in the field (Hwong et al., 2017: 485). Researchers have considered various motivations for people to use social media networks, with the most popular reasons being seeking information, communicating with others, following others' sharing of identities, engaging in social networking, and fulfilling needs for self-expression and self-actualization (Lampe et al., 2006: 168). Also, we need social networks, which are hormonally similar to our purpose of using social media. Psychologically, dopamine oscillation is associated with novelty, surprise, and the sense that we are on an exciting track. This puts people in a state of readiness, anticipation, looking, seeking, and scrolling on social media to find something exciting and trigger dopamine release (Macït et al., 2018: 884-889). When this artificial effect becomes too easy, this behavior turns into addictiveness, which is why we also define social media as an addiction.

MLS systems are programmed to keep users on the platforms longer, depending on the user's experience. However, the fact that these algorithms are exempt from ethical concerns has led to another problem, further complicating the situation. Violence and chaos attract people's attention more. In 2017, as part of a research project, more than half a million tweets about gun control, gay marriage, and climate change were reviewed (Brady et al., 2017: 7316). Research findings showed that using moral-emotional language received 20% more interaction and revival than other content. Creating annoyance among users is an effective but socially destructive way to increase engagement, significantly when all income rises directly with the time users spend on the app. In addition, another study examined the mood of Facebook users by changing their news feeds, highlighting the impact of social media networks on emotions. This study showed the contagious nature of mood among individuals. When positive posts were removed from users' news feeds, their engagement with more somber posts' increased. When the negative posts were removed, users' moods improved, and they responded to posts enthusiastically and in kind (Kramer et al., 2014: 8789). However, this research also brought up ethical debates on this subject. Facebook's decision not to require users' consent for participation in experiments raised concerns about which authority could or should restrain these experiments if they were to continue.

Another study suggests a link between changes in election results and Facebook likes (Bengtsson, 2018: 12). Interestingly, this implies that even if a political party experiences a decline in performance between elections, the leader's number of followers on Facebook continues to increase. This observation raises unanswered questions. Right-wing leaders are expected to have a much larger Facebook following than their counterparts because their

content often appeals to strong emotional responses and divisive issues, which can attract and mobilize a larger and more engaged audience. This pattern holds across Western European countries, challenging the conventional wisdom that the largest offline party necessarily has the most extensive online following. The study suggests that political parties predominantly receive Facebook likes from a certain percentage of their voters, regardless of their offline electoral success. In other words, unlike real people and institutions, social media networks can continue to grow, even if unsuccessful, as long as they attract attention. The same research study also shows that right-wing political parties that emphasize issues such as immigration, Euroscepticism, and nationalism are statistically more likely to attract more Facebook followers than other parties. The findings reveal a significant correlation indicating that the average right-wing party is expected to have more followers, ranging from 190,000 to 200,000, exceeding the range of 100,000 to 125,000 predicted for other parties (Bengtsson, 2018: 21). Liking something may seem like a small and almost insignificant action. However, when all the likes come together, they create endless communication networks, who decides what subjects to discuss; those who support a political party on Facebook, or those who vote for it is a crucial issue to consider.

A survey conducted in Turkey examines the effects of access to news. The findings reveal a positive correlation between internet use and political knowledge. Individuals who actively use the internet generally demonstrate higher levels of political knowledge. However, this study also uncovers a negative relationship between social media use and misinformation. Concerns regarding social media's role as a channel for spreading information can pose a significant challenge to democratic governance (Andı et al., 2019: 584). Disinformation, misinformation, and fake news refer to disseminating false information but differ in intent and context. Fake news is intentionally disseminating false or misleading information presented as news, aiming to deceive readers, support specific agendas, or generate financial gain. Conversely, misinformation involves the unintentional spread of incorrect or misleading information, often stemming from a lack of knowledge or misunderstanding (Aïmeur et al., 2022: 7-11). Although misleading, its dissemination is not intended to deceive. Disinformation, however, is deliberately disseminating false or misleading information with strategic goals to mislead the public, create distrust, and increase social polarization.

2.1 Emotional Politics on Social Media

Emotional manipulation through disinformation can be effective on social media platforms like X. The platform's structure, characterized by rapid information dissemination and user

engagement metrics (likes, retposts, comments), can create an environment where emotionally charged content can go viral quickly. Thus, emotionally engaging content can be more likely to be shared (Bakir and McStay, 2018: 160). For example, disinformation that taps into societal fears or prejudices can create echo chambers where individuals are repeatedly exposed to similar content. This reinforcement loop solidifies the disinformation narrative and can increase polarization by isolating users from differing viewpoints. The emotional intensity of such content can lead to higher engagement metrics, which X's algorithm then prioritizes and further can increase the visibility of the disinformation (Ide et al., 2017: 66). This algorithmic amplification can be double-edged. While it can help spread important information rapidly, disinformation can gain significant traction, especially if it is emotionally manipulative.

The ability of social media to amplify emotionally charged rhetoric presents a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can mobilize widespread support for critical issues by rapidly disseminating important messages. On the other hand, it facilitates the spread of disinformation and emotionally manipulative content, especially during politically sensitive periods. Platforms like X are designed to prioritize content that generates high engagement, which often involves provoking strong emotional responses. This creates a feedback loop, where posts that incite outrage or fear are rewarded with increased visibility. As users engage with this content, it gains even more prominence in news feeds, further amplifying its influence and reach.

Algorithmic amplification plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of political discourse on social media. While these platforms facilitate the swift dissemination of valuable information, they equally accelerate the spread of emotionally charged or manipulative content. Posts that evoke emotions such as fear, anger, or hope tend to elicit stronger reactions and attract higher engagement (Brady et al., 2017). This tendency can distort political discourse, as emotionally driven content often overshadows more factual or rational discussions. Social media algorithms are specifically designed to prioritize content that triggers immediate emotional responses, extending user engagement but at the expense of fostering deeper, more reasoned conversations. Consequently, political dialogue on these platforms frequently becomes polarized, with emotionally charged narratives dominating, rather than balanced, fact-based exchanges.

In addition to amplifying emotional rhetoric, social media significantly influences political engagement on identity-based issues. Political discourse on these platforms is increasingly centered around personal values and identity-driven topics such as religion, immigration, and minority rights. Social media creates an environment where individuals engage with content

that aligns with their values and lifestyles, thereby reinforcing group identities and fostering ideologically homogenous communities (Pariser, 2011). For example, individuals whose political preferences correspond to lifestyle choices such as environmentally conscious consumers or those with strong religious beliefs are often exposed to content that reinforces their existing views, leading to the formation of filter bubbles that further entrench their beliefs (Praet et al., 2021).

The personalization of political content on social media exacerbates polarization by continuously exposing users to content that aligns with their pre-existing values and beliefs, while limiting their exposure to opposing viewpoints. When users primarily engage with content that reinforces their identity, they become less likely to consider alternative perspectives, further entrenching their positions and contributing to a more fragmented public discourse (DellaPosta et al., 2015: 1484). Consequently, social media not only mirrors existing political divisions but also deepens them by fostering environments where polarizing content thrives. In this process, nuanced, fact-based discussions are marginalized in favor of emotionally charged, identity-driven narratives, intensifying societal fragmentation.

Media outlets are crucial in providing accurate and reliable information in these situations. Media responsibility must be addressed within legal, financial, public, and professional frameworks to combat disinformation. Legal regulations enforce the media's duty to provide accurate information. Financial structures of media organizations should support independent and unbiased journalism, as reliance on advertising revenue can compromise impartiality. Media must act according to the principles of social media, prioritizing public interest and aiming to minimize the adverse effects of disinformation on society. Adherence to journalistic ethics is essential for providing accurate and reliable information, with journalists diligently verifying the accuracy and reliability of their reports (Taş, 2016).

The fact that identity is at the forefront of the contemporary political agenda has brought about discussions regarding lifestyles and voting behavior. Lifestyle is increasingly essential in understanding individuals' political views and voting behavior (Praet et al., 2021). Our beliefs and judgments on political issues such as climate change, religion, immigration, and minorities are strongly linked to our consumption choices and daily lifestyles (Purhonen and Heikkilä, 2017: 79). This represents an alternative way to understand political preference and voting behavior. Authors such as Bennett (1998) and Giddens (1990) argue that collective identity has replaced personal identity in the postmodern society, and individuals' politics has become increasingly dependent on their lifestyle choices. Accordingly, contemporary political

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discussions increasingly focus on identity, values, and moral issues, which can easily differ from one person to another. These choices regarding lifestyle reflect fundamental aspects of personality that not only fuel cultural conflicts on topics such as race or sexuality but also shape individuals' perspectives on traditional economic matters. (DellaPosta et al., 2015: 1484) argues that we are more likely to have our communities and social networks formed by individuals with similar aesthetic tastes, lifestyles, hobbies, consumer habits, moral attitudes, and traditions.

2.2 Algorithmic Amplification of Emotional Rhetoric

Bringing like-minded people together may unite communities, radicalize beliefs, and create sharper community divisions. In 1999, Cass Sunstein explained the concept of what he calls the principle of group polarization through a series of social experiments. Sunstein's principle of group polarization argues that people tend to interact with like-minded individuals, which results in ideas within the group becoming stronger. According to this principle, individuals prefer to be in groups with whom they share their views, especially in online environments (Sunstein, 1999: 23). The repetition of similar thoughts among group members can narrow the gray areas in society by increasing polarization within the group and causing alternative views to be disregarded. In other words, after discussion and negotiation, the parties' views on the issues they advocate may become more polarized than before. For example, connecting a group of anti-vaccine individuals allows them to support one another and become more convinced about the justice of their cause. It also encourages the discussion of new ideas about convincing the rest of the world of their beliefs.

Another prominent name in this regard is Eli Pariser, who popularized the term "Filter Bubbles." Pariser proposes a filter bubble theory in which algorithms show users only content reflecting their current views, preventing users from being exposed to diverse information and opinions. The new generation of Internet filters attempts to understand our preferences based on our past actions or the preferences of people with similar characteristics, such as yourself and makes predictions or generalizations from there. In Pariser's words: *"They are prediction engines, constantly creating and refining a theory of who you are and what you will do and want next." "Together, these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us, what I have come to call a filter bubble, which fundamentally alters how we encounter ideas and information"* (Pariser, 2011: 9).

Valentino and his team's (Valentino et al., 2008) research on political participation can summarize Sunstein's and Pariser's theories and explain why emotions affect engagement on

social media and why this participation results in polarized users. Research shows that anger promotes risk-taking behavior and frequently leads to actions like violent rallies, which often turn into costly events.

In this context, social media platforms use metrics to measure users' engagement, performance, and feedback from people metrics influenced by user experience shape algorithms aimed at maximizing time spent on the platform (Reviglio and Agosti, 2020: 2-4). Therefore, algorithms amplify emotional politics through filtered news feeds, creating eco-chambers and filter bubbles that unite like-minded people and cause social divisions. Social media metrics support emotional discourse in politics. The aim is to address why bringing like-minded people together results in group polarization, highlighting the importance of social media in democracies by examining the relationship between algorithms and discourse in the current literature.

Social media algorithms prioritize content that generates high engagement, often rewarding emotionally charged or divisive rhetoric with greater visibility. This algorithmic bias has a profound impact on the dissemination of such messages. During the elections, posts that framed issues as a battle between "us" versus "them" were particularly effective in mobilizing political support. For Erdoğan, this narrative involved defending the "people" against an elite class, often framing opposition parties as threats to national unity. His rhetoric was centered around protecting Turkish values and combating Erdogan's government, which resonated with his base. In contrast, Kılıçdaroğlu's campaign adopted a tone emphasizing his role as a champion of democracy, appealing to citizens' frustrations with the presidential system, authoritarianism, and economic decline. The feedback loop created by social media platforms intensified these messages. The more emotionally charged a post was, the more interactions it garnered, which led to further amplification by the platform's algorithm (Chawla and Mehrotra, 2021: 24). This created an environment where the most divisive messages had the greatest reach, exacerbating political polarization across Turkey.

Emotional rhetoric thrives on simplification, emotional appeal, and polarization. It frames political discourse as a battle between "the people" and "the elites", and in the Turkish elections, Erdoğan skillfully used this approach by positioning himself as the defender of traditional Turkish values against corrupt elites and foreign interests. His posts often depicted the opposition as a threat to national unity, nationalism, sovereignty, and the need to protect the nation from external and internal enemies (Erdoğan, X 2023d). This simplistic, emotionally charged messaging not only connected deeply with his base but was also systematically amplified by the algorithmic structures of social media platforms. Kılıçdaroğlu also leveraged

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emotional rhetoric, though his messaging was framed around defending democracy and opposing authoritarianism. His discourse was centered on the idea of reclaiming the country for "the people" from an oppressive regime (Kılıçdaroğlu, X 2023c). Kılıçdaroğlu's posts that called for democratic restoration and addressed economic injustice generated significant engagement, particularly among opposition supporters and younger, more progressive voters. The algorithms, attuned to engagement metrics, frequently prioritized these posts, further amplifying his reach.

The algorithms' tendency to promote divisive and emotionally charged content created a feedback loop that rewarded polarizing rhetoric. Posts from both candidates that triggered strong emotional reactions were more likely to be shared, commented on, and liked, which led to even greater visibility on social media platforms. This dynamic increased the polarization of the political discourse by pushing the emotional content to the forefront of users' feeds.

3. Reviewing Turkey's Recent History of Media Restrictions

In Turkey, imposing restrictions on traditional media and government takeovers has led to a significant shift in the political landscape. Social media has increasingly become an alternative platform for political discourse, particularly for opposition groups, offering them a new avenue to express dissent and mobilize support. As the AKP government regained power in the 2007 general elections, it began exerting increased control and pressure on the media, marking a new phase of crackdowns and intimidation tactics. This escalation was marked by assaults, pressures on journalists, detentions, lawsuits, injunctions to media bosses, and raids, intensifying within the mainstream media (Demir, 2021: 63-65). From 2007 onwards, the government has increased its efforts to control and influence the media landscape. Prominent media figures began to experience pressures, threats, and substantial financial penalties. In 2009, Doğan Media group faced a tax fine of 2.4 billion dollars following allegations of corruption related to a charity organization affiliated with the Erdoğan government, as reported by the *Hürriyet* newspaper (Yeşil 2018, 246). Due to this penalty, Doğan Group was compelled to divest the *Milliyet* and *Vatan* newspapers within the group before the 2011 parliamentary elections (BBC, 2018). This media monopolization significantly threatened the public's right to information.

Pro-Erdoğan actors' and his allies' takeover of prominent media companies before the 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections marked a significant consolidation of media control (Yeşil, 2018: 240-242). Following the Gezi Protests, this control extended to efforts by government-aligned individuals, who, recognizing the influence of social network platforms

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like Facebook and X, sought to regulate online discourse and disseminate information favorable to the government. In this respect, it is also important to note that in 2016, during the July 15 coup attempt, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used the FaceTime application on TV to call the people to the streets and resist the coup (Al-Jazeera, 2016). This exemplifies the government's direct engagement with digital resources to mobilize citizens.

One of the landmark developments in Turkey's internet governance is the 2014 Internet Law, which granted authorities broad powers to block websites without court orders and mandated the retention of user data for up to two years, raised concerns about privacy and freedom of expression such as periodic blocking of websites and social media platforms during political crises or sensitive periods. For example, Turkey has seen notable instances of internet censorship impacting platforms like Wikipedia. Wikipedia faced a nationwide ban starting in April 2017 over articles alleging government ties to terrorism (Phippen J., 2017). Despite legal challenges and court rulings favoring unblocking, access remained restricted until January 2020, when the Constitutional Court deemed the ban unconstitutional.

The historical context of Turkish media restrictions is crucial in understanding the shifting dynamics of political communication in Turkey. As the government tightened its control over traditional media, dissenting voices and opposition groups were increasingly silenced, leading to a significant decline in pluralistic discourse (Demir, 2021). This monopolization of mainstream media created a void that social media platforms began to fill. Social media, therefore, became not just an alternative channel for political expression but a primary space for opposition groups to mobilize, disseminate information, and challenge government narratives. The crackdown on traditional media, starting in the late 2000s and intensifying after the 2016 coup attempt, illuminates why social media gained such importance in Turkey's political landscape.

Subsequently, Turkey's internet policies have undergone significant changes, particularly after the 2016 coup attempt. The post-coup landscape saw increased governmental control over internet usage, primarily under the auspices of the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (BTK). This agency has played a significant role in enforcing internet restrictions and monitoring online activities to ensure national security and public order (Yeşil et al., 2017: 6). Erdoğan has an instinct for addressing people and capturing their attention, which has been crucial to his popularity. Initially, he employed a traditional communication strategy, focusing on unifying themes in election campaigns, speeches, and campaign songs. This approach helped him appeal broadly across different segments of the Turkish society

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(Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2023: 86-89). However, AKP's discourse shifted from this inclusive approach to a more exclusionary one in the 2010s with key events such as the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. This change in communication strategy has been instrumental in fostering polarization and maintaining Erdoğan's grip on power by effectively targeting and mobilizing specific voter bases.

The social media law of 2020 required platforms to appoint a local representative and comply with content removal requests within 48 hours. This law significantly enhanced the powers of the BTK. Non-compliance could lead to bandwidth throttling, which makes platforms practically inaccessible. Additionally, the law requires user data to be stored locally, making it easier for Turkish authorities to access and control information. This move has been criticized for potentially enabling increased surveillance and censorship, aligning with the broader trend of Turkey's tightened internet regulations since the failed coup attempt (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Concerns about using government-sponsored trolls to manipulate online discussions and amplify pro-government narratives have also arisen. The aftermath of the Gezi Park protests saw the Turkish government leveraging social media to maintain its narrative control. The government allegedly formed a "troll army" to counteract dissenting voices on social media platforms. A study by Erkan Saka highlights how social media has become a battleground for political narratives in Turkey (Saka, 2018). The rise of pro-government social media users, known as AKTrolls, has been particularly notable. These individuals actively engage in spreading pro-AKP propaganda and discrediting opposition voices, contributing to a polarized digital environment.

In February 2023, the Center for Countering Disinformation (Dezenformasyonla Mücadele Merkezi) was established within the Presidential Directorate of Communications. This center aims to identify and counter misleading content across various platforms. It collaborates with law enforcement, media outlets, and social media platforms to mitigate the spread of false information that could undermine public discourse or national interests. However, this center has been criticized as a propaganda tool aimed at discrediting journalists and media outlets critical of the government, rather than genuinely combating disinformation (Adal, 2024).

By situating the rise of social media within the broader context of media control, this historical overview reveals how the AKP's media policies indirectly fueled the growth of online platforms as spaces for political debate. The restrictions on traditional outlets and the increasing censorship of digital platforms are part of the same continuum of media control aimed at

maintaining the government's narrative dominance. Understanding this background provides a clearer picture of why social media has become a battleground for political discourse and why the government has taken steps to regulate it. Hence, the history of media restriction is directly linked to the broader argument about the significance of social media in contemporary Turkish politics.

3.1 2023 Elections and the Candidates' Social Media Posts

Social media posts played a significant role in the 2023 election campaigns. Both Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu used social media platforms to reach a wide audience and connect emotionally with their supporters. Each candidate had a different approach. Erdoğan often emphasized national security and stability to evoke concern, while Kılıçdaroğlu shared messages of hope and change to inspire people. This section will provide an overview of their social media strategies, discuss key observations and findings from their posts, and examine how these influenced their campaigns.

Prioritizing the emotions experienced over the content of the information may harm social psychology. For example, suppose the public needs help addressing complex issues like inflation. In that case, people may increase emotional engagement by prioritizing discussions less relevant and sometimes, even insignificant to societal interests. The algorithm can also support this due to the popularity of the discussion, and this weakened social intelligence appears to be a factor that triggers political apathy in society. Moreover, apathy can replace informed voting behavior with emotional voting behavior, making it easier to use emotionally driven forms of communication effectively. Therefore, candidates who propagate suitable discursive campaigns, employing discourses that inspire the desired emotions in voters, have an increased chance of winning. In this respect, inflation can be cited as a compelling example in Turkey's 2023 elections. The public's tendency to view the government as a savior in times of deprivation or security gaps and to maintain the current status quo can also fuel emotional rhetoric. Instead of viewing this as a struggle between power and opposition, we can see it as a success for those who effectively employ emotional discourse. Despite the economic crisis, which started with the Andrew Brunson (Gall, 2018) crisis and worsened with the COVID-19 pandemic and the inadequacy of disaster management after the February 6 Earthquakes in southeast Turkey, Erdoğan's election victory can be identified as an example that supports this claim.

Emotional appeals can strengthen existing biases and deepen divisions between different ideological groups by creating echo chambers where opposing views are dismissed. The rhetoric, while seemingly inclusive, often targets only the core supporters of a candidate, excluding marginalized groups (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 161). For example, Erdoğan's post on X addressed to Kurdish voters adopts an inclusive tone, referencing the gains made during his government and invoking collective memories of past struggles (Erdoğan, X 2023b). The post warns against a return to the challenges of the 1990s and emphasizes the risk of losing the rights and freedoms achieved. By appealing to emotions and collective trauma, Erdoğan's message resonates strongly with his base, leading to high engagement, as evidenced by the 19.2 million views the post received. This exemplifies how emotional politics can mobilize support while also reinforcing divisions and excluding those outside the core voter base.

On the other hand, exclusive rhetoric on social media can gain visibility with the support of algorithms. In countries like Turkey, where identity issues and emotional politics are at the forefront, we can say that exclusive rhetoric tends to increase during election periods. In this context, users' increased engagement with anger and violence-laden posts (for example, the tendency of a user to comment on content that makes them angry during any debate on the platform) can lead the algorithm to highlight exclusive language to increase interaction and keep the user on the platform longer (Tucker et al., 2018: 44). Additionally, these systems, which produce responses and analyses based on the existing pool of information, can further deepen the issues faced in generating knowledge and policies toward disadvantaged groups by taking societal inequalities as a given.

There are some instances where the AKP, on the one hand, defines all members of "the people" as equals in its rhetoric and blames political elites who think otherwise. However, it excludes certain groups in society from its definition of the people. For example, February 28th supporters (28 Şubatçılar), FETÖ (Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization), PKK, LGBT supporters, or Feminists are excluded groups in Erdoğan's rhetoric. One of Erdoğan's posts highlights the AKP's efforts to secure Kurdish rights, such as the introduction of TRT Kurdî and Kurdish language departments at universities. He contrasts these achievements by strategically linking Kılıçdaroğlu to the PKK and FETÖ, portraying him as a threat to Turkey's stability. For instance, Erdoğan accuses Kılıçdaroğlu of dishonesty regarding the December 17-25 coup attempt, framing his actions as lies and fabrications to undermine his credibility. Additionally, Erdoğan contrasts the AKP's "true spring" of progress with the opposition's "false spring," warning that Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership would empower terrorists in Qandil (this refers

to the Qandil Mountains, a region in northern Iraq where the PKK has its stronghold) and Pennsylvania (this refers to Fethullah Gülen, the cleric residing in Pennsylvania, USA) *"Mr. Kemal's spring would only bring spring to Qandil and Pennsylvania"* (Erdoğan, X 2023a). This rhetoric not only seeks to bolster the AKP's narrative of success but also to delegitimize Kılıçdaroğlu by associating him with terrorism and past political failures, constructing a narrative where the CHP is blamed for both historical and contemporary issues in Turkey and it seeks to replace the current "official" history with its version, presenting it as the "true" history. Ironically, while the AKP's approach to history has been highly politicized, it simultaneously attempts to establish its historical narrative as the official one (Palabıyık, 2017: 77-78).

In the lead-up to the Turkish presidential elections, the AKP's efforts to delegitimize Kılıçdaroğlu sometimes even involved digital manipulation and the use of deep fake technology. Indeed, during the campaign period, CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu issued a public warning to Fahrettin Altun, head of the Communications Directorate, and his team, regarding alleged plans to create fake videos and audio recordings to discredit the opposition. Kılıçdaroğlu claimed that President Erdoğan had even hired foreign hackers to produce these deep fakes, drawing parallels to the infamous Cambridge Analytica scandal (Kılıçdaroğlu, X 2023a). The goal, according to Kılıçdaroğlu, was to manipulate voter perceptions and discourage opposition supporters from voting. Reports from high-ranking CHP officials, including those shared by journalist Murat Yetkin, supported these allegations, suggesting that Erdoğan's campaign was set to launch a smear operation using sophisticated digital manipulation techniques. These reports indicated that hackers were hired through the dark web to produce fake media and conduct cyberattacks, such as DDoS attacks, to suppress opposition voices online while promoting pro-government content (Yetkin, 2023).

Fahrettin Altun responded to Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's allegations by denying any involvement in producing deep fake videos. Altun criticized Kılıçdaroğlu's claims, describing them as baseless and aimed at undermining the government's efforts to combat misinformation. He emphasized the Directorate's focus on defending national interests and protecting democratic processes from foreign interference (Altun, 2023). However, Kılıçdaroğlu's accusations were given more weight when President Erdoğan publicly showed a deep fake video of Kılıçdaroğlu during his campaign. In the video, opposition leader Kılıçdaroğlu was depicted with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) footage incorporated into the campaign advertisement for the May 14 elections, giving the impression that it was the CHP's official campaign film. Also, PKK leader

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Murat Karayılan was included in the video, singing the campaign song alongside Kılıçdaroğlu. This video was used in Erdoğan's campaign rallies to discredit Kılıçdaroğlu and the opposition and pro-government media, portraying the linked opposition to terrorism. This strategy aims to trigger thoughts about connecting Kurds with the PKK, which is one of Erdoğan's tactics: creating an association between Kurds and terrorism and supporting the idea that citizens who do not vote for the AKP but instead support the HDP could be considered part of terrorist organizations and periodically using this idea in his campaign in different tones. While associating the opposition with terrorism can be considered a factor that increases confusion within the opposition, it can also be observed as an advantage for the government by creating suspicion in the eyes of the voters. This can be regarded as an example of precisely this kind of campaign. Erdoğan even admitted that the video was not accurate with these words; "The leader of the CHP has leaned back on the PKK terrorist organization. Kılıçdaroğlu has video recordings with those in Qandil. They published these. "Come on, come on" type. Nevertheless, it is edited; it is this, it is that. PKK members supported them with videos" (Medyascope, 2023).

Another example was the discourse against the YSP. The YSP supported Kılıçdaroğlu in the 2023 presidential elections while remaining outside the opposition alliance. The YSP was associated with Kurdish voters and could appeal to nationalist sentiments. We can observe that Facebook ads shared during the election campaign supported this discourse. For example, all ads shared via the Erdoğan Volunteers page (one of the top 10 pages by advertising budget) focused on themes of martyrs and terrorism, utilizing customized filters. These ads implied that a vote for Kılıçdaroğlu was a vote for those responsible for terrorist attacks, thereby creating a perception that the YSP supported these terrorists (Facebook, 2023).

For the opposition, the primary target of exclusion is typically Erdoğan and his administration. However, SADAT supporters, gangs of five[3], or refugees can also be observed in Kılıçdaroğlu's discourse as excluded groups (Kılıçdaroğlu, X 2023b). He positions himself as a defender of democracy, cautioning the public against alliances with government-affiliated groups and asserting that their influence will diminish under his leadership. Furthermore, Kılıçdaroğlu's portrayal of an Anatolian student benefiting from the republic reinforces this comparison, highlighting his campaign's thematic emphasis on social equity (OdaTv, 2011). In his post (Kılıçdaroğlu, X 2023d), Kılıçdaroğlu attributes the strained relationships and divisive

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[3] The gang of five; is a political term for companies accused of corruption by the opposition, including Cengiz Holding, Limak Holding, Kalyon Holding, Kolin Holding, and Makyol Group.

language in society to Erdoğan and the AKP government. In essence, this rhetoric aims to mobilize voters through exclusionary discourse.

Emotional bonds and local solidarity can contribute to polarization on social media by encouraging an "us vs. them" mentality in which individuals prioritize the interests of their group over cooperation and understanding with others. For example, a study focusing on Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders's 2016 campaigns found that right-wing political communication contained a negative, exclusionary, and authoritarian tone. In contrast, left parties' political communication has been described as more positive, tolerant, and participatory (Tucker et al., 2018: 17-23). In this context, in the 2023 Turkish presidential election campaigns, the opposition and the government have discourses that will confirm this hypothesis. It is possible to observe a negative, exclusionary, and authoritarian tone in Erdoğan's post because he references historical events, such as his conviction in Edirne or his correlation between Vecihi Hürkuş[4] and the Atatürk Airport reference. In the 21st post, although Erdoğan's narrative about Hürkuş and how his dreams being buried is somewhat accurate, the unfortunate events were not necessarily related to Vecihi Hürkuş's efforts in aviation.

Erdoğan positions himself as the guardian of a will that has encountered numerous obstacles over the years, emphasizing his role in ensuring national survival. As seen in his posts (Erdoğan, X 2023d), (Erdoğan, X 2023c) he asserts that he and his administration have been instrumental in bringing democracy to Turkey and insists that only he can sustain these democratic gains. Otherwise, he warns that the hard-won rights and freedoms, whether for minorities (Kurds) or the majority (conservatives), could regress to the mindset reminiscent of CHP's policies before 2002.

In the election campaign of the opposition candidate Kılıçdaroğlu, we mainly come across statements that associate him with democracy (Kılıçdaroğlu, X 2023d). His biggest election promise is to bring democracy back to Turkey. The opposition's promise to return to the parliamentary system against the presidential system can be considered one of the most important motivations to keep the opposition together. His campaign aims to create an umbrella by being the defender of everyone who has been wronged by this government, making peace with everyone, and opposing the one-person regime. However, the fact that Kılıçdaroğlu's

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[4] In 1923, Vecihi Hürkuş manufactured the first Turkish aircraft using engines captured as spoils from the Greeks. Vecihi Hürkuş, on January 28, 1925, covertly prepared his plane and flew without obtaining permission from anyone or informing the airfield command. This incident, a violation of the chain of command and flight discipline, resulted in him receiving an administrative penalty.

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candidacy has been a long-discussed issue and that it was announced under intense criticism from his base voters appears to be a factor that weakens the opposition (Gültekin, 2023). Ultimately, all these discussions have expanded the axis of emotional politics.

Politicians can protect themselves from criticism by identifying themselves or their parties with important personality cults or historical events on social media. In other words, creating specific identity definitions for themselves and their supporters can create a discussion environment where disagreements become personal attacks. In this context, the election of Erdoğan as the candidate of the AKP-MHP coalition can be observed as a consistent move on the part of the People's Alliance. AKP and MHP stand out in loyalty to the leader in their party traditions (Celep, 2019: 141). However, we can observe that in the CHP, where Nation Alliance leader Kılıçdaroğlu is also the party leader, the tradition of loyalty to the party rather than the leader comes to the fore. It is possible to say that for CHP, loyalty to the leader has matured with loyalty to Ataturk and his principles and reforms (Ayan, 2010: 210-211). Therefore, loyalty to Atatürk stands out for Turkish citizens as loyalty to Erdoğan in Erdoğan's vision of the new Turkey. In other words, while CHP voters vote for CHP out of allegiance to Atatürk, AKP voters similarly vote for Erdoğan, not AKP. In this argument, two voter profiles (bone voters) that are similar in theory but behave differently in practice match with the party, including their own identity and lifestyle choices. Hence, when examining undecided voters and those who remain loyal to their party despite various challenges, it is essential to consider individuals who seek change beyond partisan or national affiliations but encounter representation issues.

Separated by culture, religion, language, race, or lifestyle, people gradually become disconnected from each other and unable to share a particular familiar national feeling. The fact that Erdoğan still frequently makes statements about Adnan Menderes, the year 2002 when he was the Mayor of Istanbul, or the February 28th process maintains the ongoing polarization among the people alive in the public memory and keeps alive the metaphor of the cause for which they did everything. In long-term governments, like in Turkey, political debates are susceptible to manipulation by creating new realities for their supporters. Keeping events like February 28, December 17-25, or past terrorist attacks alive in social memory can create illusions. This can lead to rewriting history to fit their ideologies, endorsing actions deemed best for specific groups mistreated due to their culture, religion, or class, not only bringing justice to the people but also perpetuating these manipulations and legitimizing their governance (Palabıyık, 2017: 75). Türkiye Century is an excellent example of an argument that can be observed in this regard. It is a concept that expresses Turkey's development and

transformation in the 21ˢᵗ century in light of Erdoğan's vision (Yalçın, 2023). It summarizes the critical events, achievements, challenges, and changes that Turkey has encountered in the 21ˢᵗ century, spilling it over before the AKP and after the AKP. The changes and the economic growth that Turkey has experienced in domestic and foreign policies, especially since the early 2000s, are essential elements of this vision.

The above analysis demonstrates the connections between Tayyip Erdoğan's and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's discourses on social media platform X during the campaign period of Turkey's 2023 presidential elections, social media algorithms and their role in the polarization of the society. Although the CDA presented in this article cannot show exactly the extent and specific level of polarization caused by the discursive strategies of President Erdoğan and the opposition leader Kılıçdaroğlu, the analysis demonstrates that posts featuring emotionally charged context garnered significantly higher views and engagement during the election campaign. It can be observed that these discourses found a clear response in society, and social media played an influential role.

4. Conclusion

Messages that are emotional and straightforward fit very well with how algorithms work. They simplify complex political issues into easy-to-understand choices, such as "good vs. bad" or "us vs. them." This taps into emotions like fear, anger, or hope, which drive user engagement. This content is easy to share and react to, and it spreads quickly. As a result, algorithms promote this kind of content more, allowing these messages to dominate political discussions online.

As these messages are shared repeatedly within echo chambers, people become more certain of their beliefs, making it harder to consider different perspectives (Pariser, 2011). This leads to polarization, where opposing political sides become more entrenched and less likely to compromise or communicate with each other. Another concern is the spread of disinformation. Since algorithms prioritize content that triggers strong emotions, false or misleading information can spread quickly, especially if it fits into an emotionally charged narrative. Disinformation that plays on fears or reinforces simple ideas often spreads much faster than factual corrections. This can distort public understanding of important issues, leading to a political environment driven by feelings rather than facts.

The result is that candidates who use emotionally charged messaging have a bigger advantage. Their posts are more likely to reach a broader audience because algorithms prioritize content

that generates high levels of engagement (Bakir and McStay, 2018). In contrast, more detailed or complex discussions do not perform as well because they do not provoke the same immediate emotional response. This means candidates who use emotionally driven rhetoric often set the tone of political debates, framing elections as fights between good and bad, rather than opportunities to discuss detailed policies. This constant promotion of emotionally charged messages also deepens divisions between groups. Social media algorithms create echo chambers, where users mostly see content that matches their views.

In conclusion, the relationship between emotionally driven discourse and social media algorithms is important to understanding the current dynamics of political polarization. The analysis demonstrates that posts characterized by emotionally charged rhetoric tend to garner significantly higher engagement on social media platforms. This aligns with the platforms' design, which favors content that provokes strong emotional responses, creating a feedback loop that encourages political actors to adopt more extreme and sensational language to boost their visibility and influence. This dynamic is particularly significant in Turkey, where media freedom is restricted, and government influence over media outlets is strong. The findings reveal how social media algorithms amplify content that generates high levels of engagement, often prioritizing emotional and divisive posts. This amplification effect intensifies political polarization and reinforces echo chambers, where users are exposed predominantly to viewpoints that align with their beliefs. As a result, the broader societal discourse becomes increasingly fragmented and polarized.

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